Two Fairbury Citizens Reaching 117 Years of Age Created National News

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Fairbury made the national newspapers in January of 1917. Two citizens of Fairbury, Stephen Young and Sophia Lancaster, died in the same week. Each of these Fairbury citizens was purported to be 117 years old. Both of these citizens were African Americans, and both were former slaves.

For Stephen Young to be 117 years old when he died, his birth year needed to be around 1801. His obituary in the Pantagraph recounted that he was born in 1800 in Tennessee. He was a slave for sixty years. Stephen served as a cook in Wilder's Brigade in the Civil War. After the Civil War ended, he married and moved to Fairbury. Mr. Young worked as a teamster for 43 years in Fairbury. Stephen Young's wife, Julia, died in 1903. He spent his last few years living at the county farm, officially known as the Livingston County Poor Farm.

Wilder's Brigade was an Indiana unit in the Civil War. During the American Civil War, John Thomas Wilder was an officer in the Union Army, noted principally for capturing the critical mountain pass of Hoover's Gap during the Tullahoma Campaign in Central Tennessee in June 1863. Wilder had personally ensured that his "Lightning Brigade" of mounted infantry was equipped with the new Spencer repeating rifle. He initially had to appeal to his men to pay for these weapons themselves before the government agreed to carry the cost. The victory at Hoover's Gap was mainly attributed to Wilder's persistence in procuring the new rifles, which totally disoriented the enemy.

A genealogical search found no mention of Stephen in any U.S. Census before 1870. In the 1870 Census, Stephen Young and his wife Julia were living in Lebanon, Tennessee. Stephen listed his year of birth as 1827, and he was a farm laborer. Thomas Young, age 14, was living with them. The relationship between Thomas and Mr. and Mrs. Young is unknown.

The 1880 U.S. Census finds Stephen and Julia Young living in Fairbury. Stephen listed his birth year as 1819, and his occupation was a farmer. Adopted son Robert Young and grandson John Young were living with them.

No 1890 Census data is available because the census records were destroyed in a fire in 1921. In the 1900 Census, Stephen and his wife Julia were still living in Fairbury, and his occupation was as a teamster. Stephen listed his birth date as 1816.

In the 1910 Census, Stephen Young was widowed and was still living in Fairbury. His birth year was 1801. He died on January 19, 1917. Stephen and his wife Julia Ann are

buried in Fairbury's Graceland Cemetery in the older section along South Seventh Street. A newer stone, not a 1917 era stone, is at the grave.

In June of 1959, the Blade published a story about war veterans buried in Graceland Cemetery. This article recounted that Stephen Young was a wagon driver with the Third Illinois Cavalry, Company K. The Blade noted that if Mr. Young had been a regular enlisted soldier, he would have been the oldest veteran of the Civil War. Stephen Young is not shown in the current Civil War databases for Illinois and Indiana veterans.

The Third Illinois Cavalry Company K was made up of almost all Fairbury men. If Mr. Young served with this unit as a wagon driver, it would make sense that he decided to move from Tennessee to Fairbury after the war.

Julia Ann Young died on November 15, 1903. She was born in 1825 and died at the age of 78. Julia spent the first 30 years of her life as a slave. After being freed, she married Stephen Young in 1865 in Tennessee. On the marriage license, her name was listed as Julia Young. Her maiden name is unknown. Mr. and Mrs. Young moved to Fairbury in 1875. Her obituary said one son and a grandson survived her. All her other relatives had already passed away.

The 1917 obituary for Sophia Lancaster recounted that she was born in 1799 in Tennessee. She was also a former slave. Sophia came to live with her daughter, Mrs. John Walker, in Fairbury, about 1907. Her four children survived her. The obituary stated that Sophia had papers she received from her first slave master's son, which documented her birth date.

In the 1870 Census, she was married to Thomas Lancaster and was living in Lebanon, Tennessee. Thomas Lancaster was born in 1840. Sophia listed her birth year as 1840. They had two children, Fannie and Cilly, living with them.

Sophia and her husband were still living in Lebanon, Tennessee, in the 1880 census. Sophia listed her birth year as 1835. In the 1900 U.S. Census, Sophia enumerated her birth year as 1824. She was living with her husband, Thomas, in Lebanon.

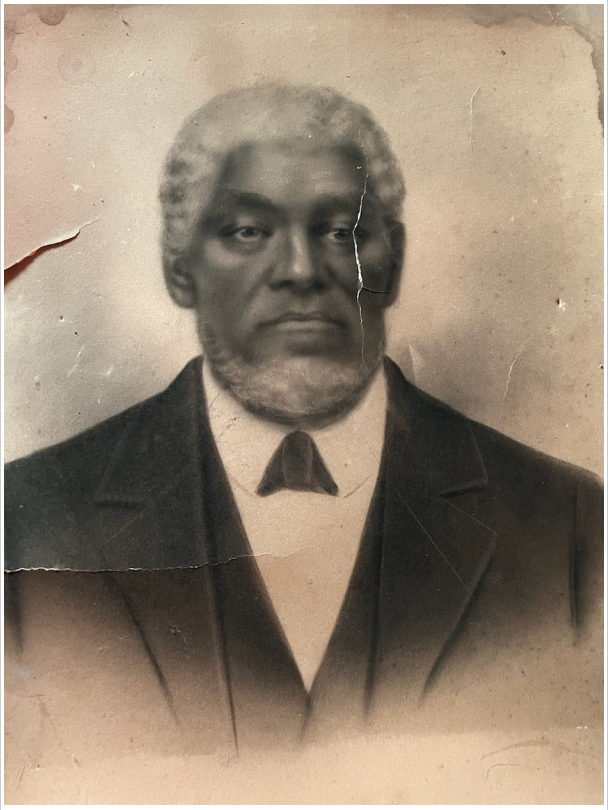
After reviewing all the genealogical data for Stephen Young and Sophia Lancaster, it is unlikely that either one was 117 years old. Stephen Young gave the census takers the differing birth years of 1827, 1819, 1816, and 1801. His wife was born in 1825. It would be unlikely that Mrs. Young would marry a man 24 years her senior in age.

In the case of Sophia Lancaster, it is unlikely that Thomas Lancaster would marry a woman that was 40 years older than he was. Unfortunately, no copies of her paperwork are known to exist today.

Statistically, it is extremely improbable for anyone to live to be 117 years old. The chances of two people, both reaching 117 and dying in the same week in the same town,

are astronomical. This statistical improbability explains why this news story was so exciting and why it was published in so many newspapers all around the United States.

Maybe at some future date, additional documentation will be discovered that better establishes these two unique Fairbury citizens' real ages.



Old photo found in estate papers of Lorine Wink of Fairbury with notation that Stephen Young was a coal handler and a good friend

Stephen Young was purported to be 117 years of age when he died in 1917. He is buried in the oldest section of Graceland Cemetery along south Seventh Street.